

Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission Special Meeting

February 9, 2018

A special meeting of the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission convened on February 9, 2018 in Room 4050/60 of the Seattle Municipal Tower, 700 Fifth Avenue. Commission Chair Brendan Donckers called the meeting to order at 4:00 p.m. Vice Chair Vickie Rawlins and Commissioners Charlene Angeles, Bruce Carter, Eileen Norton, and Hardeep Singh Rekhi were in attendance. Executive Director Wayne Barnett was joined by staff members Polly Grow and Annie Tran.

1) Public Comment

The Commission took public comment after disposing of the action items on the agenda.

Action Item

1 and 2) Minutes for December 13, 2017, and January 11, 2018 special meetings

Commissioner Norton moved that the minutes from the December 13, 2017 and January 11, 2017 special meetings be approved. The Vice-Chair seconded. The minutes for the December 13, 2017 and January 11, 2017 special meeting were unanimously approved.

3) Rule establishing employees to file Financial Interest Statements for 2017

This is a rule that the law requires the Commission to adopt annually setting forth the names of the employees required to file Financial Interest Statements for the preceding Calendar Year. The Executive Director requested the Commission adopt the lists provided by each department. Commissioner Norton moved that the rule be adopted. Commissioner Carter seconded. The rule establishing which employees must file Financial Interest Statements for the 2017 Calendar Year was unanimously approved.

Discussion Items

4) Public comment on the Democracy Voucher Program

The Director told the Commission that after every election New York City holds a hearing to take public comment on its public financing program. He said he thought it was a good idea, and so the Commission staff had advertised the opportunity for people to come and testify to their experience with the program at this meeting.

Patrick Burke, who was a campaign manager for a Seattle candidate, said he thought there could be better outreach made to Seattle's communities of color, which would result in a much higher participation rate.

Commissioner Carter asked Mr. Burke if he had any specific steps he would advocate to help the program reach more diverse communities.

Mr. Burke encouraged the Commission to reach out to some community leaders and involve them in assessing what methods would improve participation from people of color. He also felt that setting up volunteer groups to promote the program throughout the community would increase interest and participation.

Commissioner Angeles inquired about the reasons Mr. Burke felt the communities of color did not receive the same level of information regarding the Democracy Voucher Program.

While canvassing, Mr. Burke was surprised to learn that members of the Capitol Hill community were well informed about the Democracy Voucher Program, while residents of the Central District had little knowledge about the program, and in some cases did not receive vouchers at all. Mr. Burke estimated the disparity between neighborhoods at roughly 90% awareness amongst Capitol Hill residents, versus 10% awareness among Central District residents.

In Mr. Burke's opinion, all residents need to be well versed in the Democracy Voucher Program, and not have their initial introduction come while the candidates or their campaigns are lobbying voters.

Another point Mr. Burke made was his belief that campaigns should not allow employees, in either their services agreement or their contracts, to have their compensation dependent on qualifying for the program.

Commissioner Rekhi asked for clarification as to the standard practice of paying staff members, and asked what amounts they were compensated.

Mr. Burke told Commissioner Rekhi that not only did he not make minimum wage, he wasn't compensated at all.

The Director acknowledged that despite staff's efforts, all residents were not knowledgeable about how to use their vouchers in the first year of the program. He said he is exploring ways to do more education for 2019.

John Peoples thanked the Commission staff, especially Polly Grow, for their efforts in assisting him throughout the campaign season. Mr. Peoples also thanked the Commission for vigorously pursuing alleged violations associated with the Democracy Voucher Program. That aside, Mr. Peoples opposed the voucher program. He noted that while I-122 passed overwhelmingly, only 24 percent of Seattle's registered voters voted for the program.

Mr. Peoples also said it was difficult to qualify for the program. He said the program did not diminish the need for money in Seattle City politics.

Hisam Goueli, who ran for Seattle City Council Position 8 during the 2017 Primary Election, said that he was one of three candidates in that race to qualify for the Democracy Voucher Program prior to the end of the Primary. Mr. Goueli, his campaign manager, and his

treasurer all had mixed feelings about the Democracy Voucher Program. Their belief was the program would help take big money out of Seattle City politics, and that the best way to fund campaigns would be to tap individuals who had some capacity to donate their vouchers to a candidate they believed in. Mr. Goueli's camp saw some very serious problems within the process. According to Mr. Goueli, they believed the program would be a good choice for his campaign, since he was not involved with politics prior to announcing his candidacy. The Democracy Voucher Program seemed like a method to secure funding and allow Mr. Goueli to run a full campaign. Part of the issue came with online donations, and obtaining physical signatures for authentication purposes. Mr. Goueli's campaign team would have to schedule times to meet donors, and gather physical signatures, which they found difficult and time consuming, and severely diminished the time they were able to devote to campaigning.

Commissioner Norton asked Mr. Goueli if he thought the Democracy Voucher Program did anything well.

Mr. Goueli felt the one thing that stood out was being able to speak to community member about being a part of the civic process. It also showed him how many of his friends had moved out of the City altogether, or were unable to afford even a \$10 contribution.

Joseph Nguyen shared his experience with the Democracy Voucher Program as a non-candidate. Mr. Nguyen works in analytics, and published a piece in the South Seattle Emerald detailing the efficacy of the Democracy Voucher Program. His initial reaction was adverse; he felt that the program would not be cost effective. However, his opinion changed after he saw the outcome following the program's first run-through. Based on Mr. Nguyen's research, every candidate who raised the most money for their campaign ended up victorious. Before the Democracy Vouchers were available, less than two percent of people donated money to

campaigns in Seattle, meaning a small group of people had an inordinate amount of influence over the outcome of campaigns. After Democracy Vouchers were implemented, things improved. In Mr. Nguyen's opinion, ridding Seattle elections of big money campaigns is not realistic. According to his research, the program created a small shift in demographic by helping engage both youth voters and voters of color, as well as increasing their participation. Mr. Nguyen concluded that the Democracy Voucher Program is more equipped to engage residents, rather than to remove big money from Seattle politics.

Jon Grant, who ran for Seattle City Council Position 8 during the 2017 Primary and General Elections, told the Commission that based on his experience with the Democracy Voucher Program, it was a huge success. Mr. Grant's campaign successfully raised the full \$300,000 allowed under the guidelines of the program, and had over 4,000 donors contribute to his campaign. That was roughly eight times as many contributors as Mr. Grant had during his previous candidacy, which was prior to the program's inception. According to Mr. Grant, the program was a real game changer for a grass roots candidate. Although Mr. Grant had a multitude of wonderful things to say regarding the program, he did feel some tweaks could be made to improve the overall success. One of his issues was the Commission's decision to re-impose the Spending Limit after the Primary. In hindsight, Mr. Grant felt that the only result of this decision was creating an administrative headache for Commission staff, the Commission, and confusion for the candidates. So he would recommend in the future that the Commission not re-impose the spending cap. Secondly, Mr. Grant felt that the \$300,000 spending limit for at-large candidates is too low. He suggested a slight increase in the amount of Democracy Vouchers each candidate could redeem: \$350,000 total for at-large candidates, and \$200,000 for the District races.

Commissioner Norton asked Mr. Grant for an example of how the increased amount would positively affect a campaign.

Mr. Grant said his campaign could have created a more competitive communications budget with the additional \$50,000, which would have helped since his opponent was supported by roughly \$200,000 in Independent Expenditures. Mr. Grant felt a \$50,000 increase would provide a significant amount of assistance for grass root candidates, especially since they do not receive the benefit of Independent Expenditures, or access to wealthy contributors.

5) I-122 status report

The Director shared with the Commission that the updated legislative changes should be ready by late March to early April of 2018. The Director also introduced Brian McCabe from Georgetown University and Jennifer Heerwig from SUNY Stonybrook, two academics studying the voucher program. Finally, the Director told the Commission that the candidate and resident FAQs had been updated for the 2019 election cycle, and were available in 15 languages on the Commission's website.

6) Executive Director's report

Mr. Barnett had nothing additional to report.

The special meeting for February 9, 2018 adjourned at 5:22 p.m.